

Early Childhood Folio

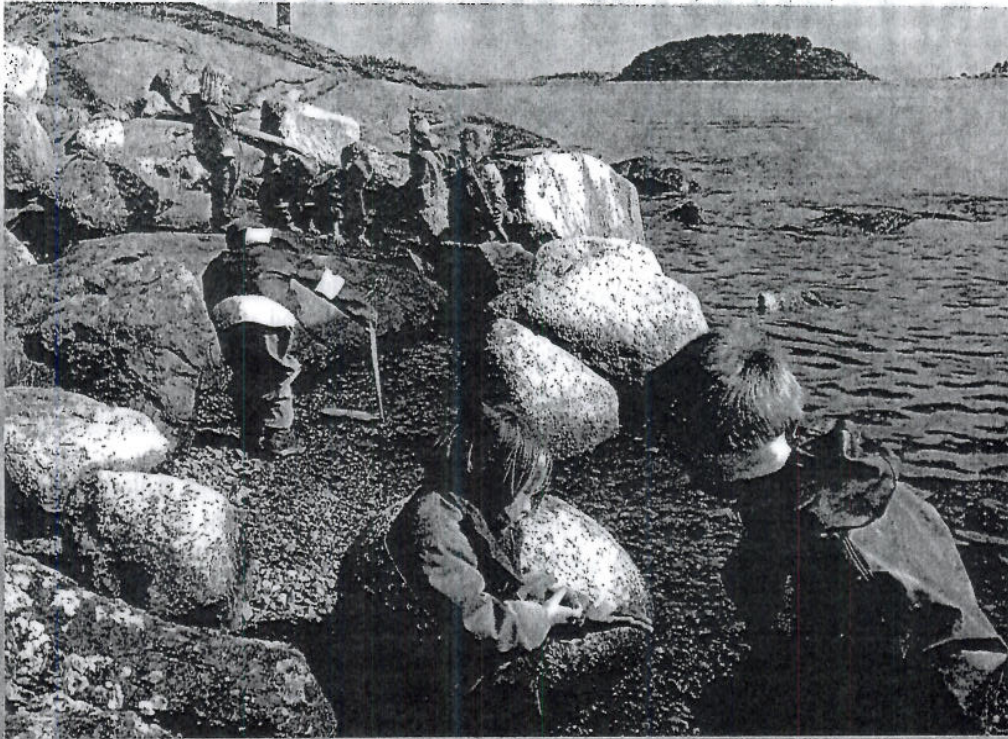


Photo by Judith Duncan

Roaldsøy Barnhage, Norway

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CONTINUITY OF LEARNING:

adding funds of knowledge from the home environment

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In comparison to previous generations, families these days are leading increasingly complex lives. Children often have a diversity of experiences from various learning communities before they begin school. For example, they may have been involved in one or more early childhood settings before moving on to school, where they join the new community of the school; and they have the experience of the home community, which may or may not involve an extended family. They may be involved in cultural, sporting, artistic, and/or spiritual communities. A child may be involved in many communities each week, or may experience a number of different communities over a period of time. This can be referred to as the "multidimensionality of student experience" (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005, p. 6).

Some of these communities may be very similar to each other—for example, involvement in a spiritual community may in many ways require knowledge of activities similar to those practised at home. Some communities may be very disparate; for example, a swimming lesson may operate very differently from a play group and have a different set of expectations and modes of participation. The constant factor, however, is the mediating one of the family. This article explores the knowledge families have of their child and the importance for teachers, families, and the child of sharing this knowledge.

Funds of knowledge

In their book *Funds of Knowledge* Norma Gonzales, Luis Moll, and Cathy Amanti define "funds of knowledge" as being "based on a simple premise: People are competent, they have knowledge, and their life experiences have given them that knowledge" (2005, p. ix). Gonzales et al. focus on teachers developing reciprocal relationships with families, in part to identify the knowledge, skills, and experiences of

families that could be shared with the teachers to enhance classroom practice and students' learning: "[a] funds of knowledge approach facilitates a systematic and powerful way to represent communities in terms of resources, the wherewithal they possess, and how to harness these resources for classroom teachers" (p. x).

As well as viewing a family's skills and knowledge as resources the teacher can tap into, it is also possible to see the family as a mediating factor in terms of the child's interactions with the various learning communities the child is involved in (as shown in Figure 1). This view highlights the necessity of developing reciprocal and responsive relationships between the family and the centre or classroom.

In this framework the family can be seen as a pivotal point and constant frame of reference for the child. At any one time a child is a participant in many communities, not just one. It is the family, as the mediating factor, that has the knowledge of the child's experience of these things.

Communities of practice

When we look more closely at the child's experience of, and between, these communities, a useful concept is Etienne Wenger's (1998) definition of a community of practice as a "living context that can give newcomers access to competence and also invite a personal experience of engagement by which to incorporate that competence into an identity of participation" (p. 214). Children come to an early childhood centre or school with varying experiences of participation. Each of the communities they have been a part of may have functioned in entirely different ways, with a multitude of different foci. How they have approached these different settings and how their sense of belonging, engagement, and participation has developed are important

indicators for a teacher in deciding how to scaffold and bridge a child's entry into, and learning within, any community of learning. Once again, it is often the family that holds this information.

Reciprocal relationships

In their exploration of funds of knowledge Gonzales et al. (2005) found that "once the relationship level of the communication between parents and teachers becomes more reciprocal ... it creates new possibilities for teachers to engage households and for parents to engage the school in fundamentally new ways" (p. 280). When the family, and its knowledge of the child, is viewed as an integral part of the learning community, strong, responsive, reciprocal relationships can then be formed between the family and the centre or school, supporting the child's sense of belonging.

The theoretical framework described above (and underpinning the discussion that follows) also follows closely the principles outlined in *Te Whāriki*, the early childhood curriculum (Ministry of Education, 1996): empowerment, holistic development, family and community, and relationships.

Two projects

Examples of what a family's fund of knowledge about their child might look like, and how that knowledge might be shared, have been collected from two projects we have worked on over the last five years—Dispositions in Social Context, and the Early Childhood Learning and Assessment Exemplar.

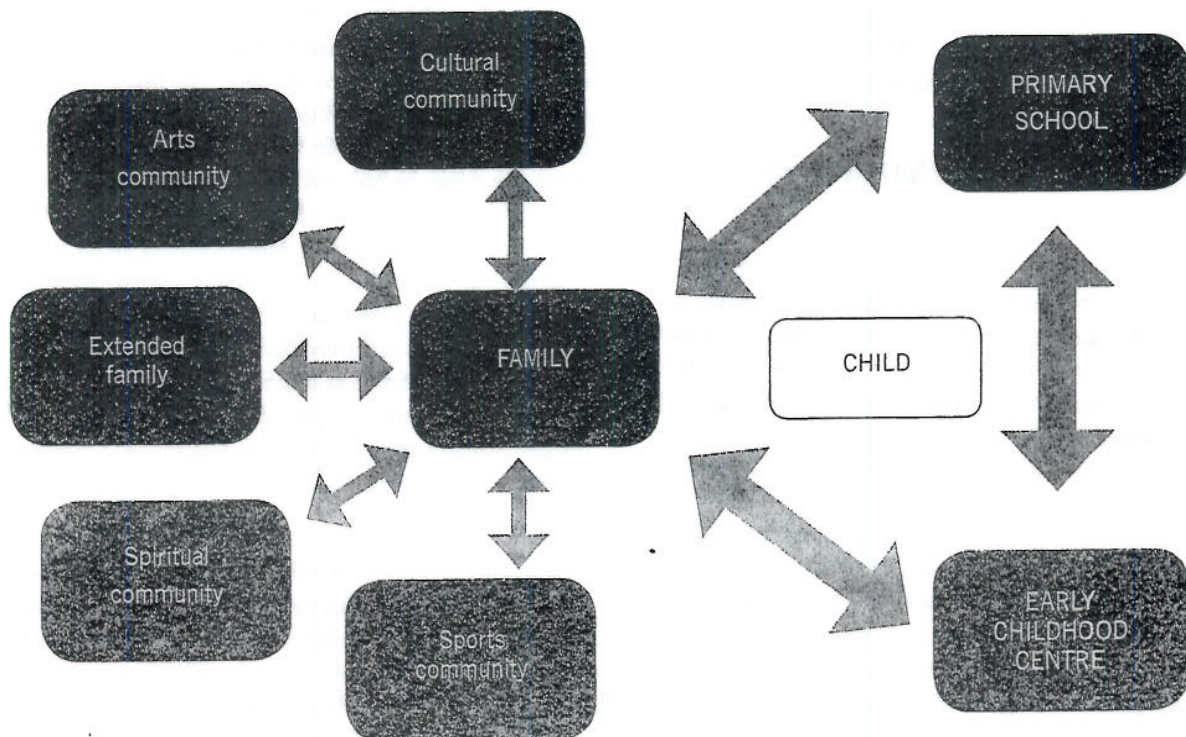
Dispositions in Social Context

This 3-year project, funded by the Royal Society of New Zealand's Marsden fund and completed in 2005, was headed by Anne Smith (Director, Children's Issues Centre, University of Otago) and Margaret Carr (Professor of Professional Studies in Education, The University of Waikato). The project began with the desire to explore ideas about learning dispositions and develop research methods that would include children's perspectives. One focus of the research was to explore how learning dispositions, through identity, travel between the various settings and activities in which the children participate, such as their home, their early childhood setting, and school—that is, if a child develops a learning identity, or sense of self as being a confident and capable learner in one setting, how this can give him or her the confidence and skills needed to learn in another setting.

The research design

Twenty-seven case-study children were selected from five early childhood centres: three in the South Island and two in the North Island. The centres included kindergartens and early childhood centres and were selected on the basis that they evidenced good-quality early childhood environments and teaching practices. Once the centres had been selected, the children were then chosen by their birthdates. In this way we had a group of children who were approximately the same age and who would be entering school around the same time, giving us a sample with a clear selection criterion.

FIGURE 1 THE FAMILY AS A MEDIATING FACTOR



As a research team we developed a variety of methods, which have been explained in depth elsewhere (Smith et al., 2003). We observed the children at their early childhood centre for periods of between 4–6 hours, over two observational periods at least 6 months apart. During these observational times each case-study child wore a remote microphone. As well as making written observations we took digital photos, which we also used in talking with the children. The observational notes and transcripts were analysed in order to identify episodes in which the child appeared to be engaged with people, places, and/or things. Sometimes the child was engaged for a sustained period of time in a particular activity, or it may have been something the child returned to repeatedly.

We interviewed the teachers about their observations of the children and conducted semistructured but informal interviews with children's parents. The aim of the latter interviews was to gain an insight into both the child's wider world outside of the early childhood centre and the parents' view of the child and the child's learning. We also collated copies of the documentation kept by the staff at each case-study child's early childhood centre, which included the children's learning profiles, and their artwork.

When the children began primary school we undertook the third and final set of observations. The research methods were slightly modified to accommodate the changed context—while some of the children wore remote microphones, a portable tape recorder was placed on the tables in several of the classrooms. The other observational methods were the same as before: observational records, digital photos, and interviews with the children, parents, and teachers.

Early Childhood Learning and Assessment Exemplar

This project started in 2001, as a pilot alongside the Ministry of Education's National Exemplar project in schools. Over the course of the next 4 years written assessments were collected, collated, and analysed from more than 50 centres from all around New Zealand. The first set of early childhood exemplars, *Kei Tua o te Pae* (Ministry of Education, 2005), was launched at the beginning of 2005; a second set is still in development. The assessments were in narrative form, often in the Learning Story format, and assessed both group and individual activities.

So how do we access funds of knowledge?

Conversations

What became apparent from both projects was the importance of conversations with the child and the family, and careful listening by the teachers. Conversations are important in many ways. Barbara Rogoff (2003) suggests that "everyday conversations that are not designed as instruction frequently provide children with important access to information and involvement in the skills of their community" (p. 283).

Conversations with the child or family may point to experiences the child has had in other places, indicating to the teacher aspects that can be followed up later with the child or family and allowing a deeper understanding of the child's learning to develop. The deeper the understanding the teacher has of the child's experiences elsewhere, the more the teacher can actively create links for the child and support learning, and in turn deepen the conversation. By valuing families' knowledge, such understanding also reinforces teachers' perception of them as being critical, integrated participants in the learning community. The two following examples illustrate this. For reasons of confidentiality, the names of all the children in this article have been changed.

Mohammed

Mohammed had an older brother who had attended the same kindergarten a couple of years earlier. At one point his brother had broken his leg during his time at kindergarten and the teacher had visited him at home. The teacher had linked into the family's strong artistic background and Mohammed's mother had lent her expertise in various ways to the kindergarten—very much the way that Gonzalez, Moll, and Amanti described in their research. Over this time the teacher came to know something about the family's life experiences, particularly the impact of Mohammed's father's job as a ship's captain.

One day when Mohammed was fairly new to kindergarten he joined the teacher, who was sitting at a table with a small group of boys. They were all drawing and having a conversation about their pictures. The teacher encouraged Mohammed to join them and explained to him that they were drawing dots, then joining them up. At no time did Mohammed attempt to talk to the other boys; instead, he talked directly to the teacher. He did, however, pay close attention to what was said around him and what the other boys were drawing. Throughout the conversation the teacher used her knowledge of Mohammed's life experiences to support his participation in the group. At this stage Mohammed appeared to be working on the periphery of the group and the teacher was guiding him to participate. Her knowledge of his home life gave her a way of doing this.

Through her conversations with him and the other boys she was able to scaffold Mohammed's interactions. At first this took the form of describing what they were doing and making connections between what each of them was drawing. As the conversation and complexity of the drawings developed, she drew on what she knew of Mohammed's family to support his participation. At first they all described what they were drawing (spirals and spider webs). Then, as the stories grew and they each tried to go one better than the one before, one child told a story about a monster who came and ate the mummy, and the daddy then looked after the baby. This led to conversations about babies.

The teacher then prompted Mohammed to talk about his family's life on his father's ship, where he was born. This began a discussion with the other children as to where they had been born and Mohammed was able to join in. Later, the teacher was able to follow up with Mohammed's family the things he had told her during the conversation. The family gave the kindergarten a CD of photos taken when Mohammed and his brother travelled back to India with his parents on his father's ship.

In this way the teacher's knowledge of Mohammed's family allowed her to scaffold his participation in the conversation, from the fringes of the group into a fuller involvement. By sharing this with the family she supported their role as active participants in the centre's learning community. In turn, the photos that the family shared helped the teachers to gain further knowledge of Mohammed's experiences in other important communities in his life.

Sally

Sally and her friend arrived at the art table where the teacher had set up a display of daffodils and white, yellow, blue, orange, and green paints. The teacher encouraged the children to have a go at painting a picture of the daffodils by talking to them about the different parts of the flowers and what they looked like. Sally and her friend both sat down to paint. Sally didn't talk to the other children in the group, concentrating instead on her painting. She seemed to be very aware of the conversations going on around her and added things to her painting when she heard the teacher

suggesting it to another child. However, she also took the activity one step further in her own way by accessing other art resources around the area (such as feathers) and then folding her painting in half to make a pattern like a butterfly. When she was finally satisfied with this painting, she put it out to dry and then started on another. During this second painting she participated more in the conversation going on around her.

Sally often made connections with things that were going on in her life outside of kindergarten. Although her nuclear family was made up of her mother, her father, and herself, she was close to her extended family and visited her cousins or grandparents a least a couple of times a week.

In one 10-minute time frame Sally made two references to things happening in her family. The first was a comment about how Sally and her father were going to plant some vegetables in the garden in spring, which connected the drawing of the daffodils with an event happening at home. The second reference was in her painting and what she said about it: a father, a mother, and a baby daffodil, the same family structure as her own. The teacher was able to comment on this to her.

The teacher had created an environment within the art corner that could stimulate the children's interest in studying and painting daffodils. However, the children were also given control over how they interacted within that environment—Sally could access the resources she wanted to use. She was also able to demonstrate the imaginative connections she was making between what was happening in the kindergarten setting—the painting of the flowers—and the planting activity she was anticipating at home with her father. These factors facilitated what Barbara Rogoff (2003) refers to as an “everyday conversation” that provided the teacher with an insight into Sally's activities and experiences at home.

While both these conversations were with children, not parents or families, they provided a point of contact the teacher could then follow up with the families, to explore the ideas further. Often this kind of exploration takes the form of a casual conversation when the child is picked up or dropped off.

Recorded conversations and written assessments

A second way of accessing the family's funds of knowledge about their child can be through written contributions to the child's portfolio made by the teacher, the child, or the family. The strength of this type of interaction is that the information can be both revisited and shared.

Wenger (1998) defines reification as “the process of giving form to our experience by producing objects that congeal this experience into ‘thingness’”. In so doing we create points of focus around which the negotiation of meaning becomes organized” (p. 58). Through the process of recording Learning Stories and parents', teachers', and children's voices in early childhood portfolios, the learning that is valued in that particular community is reified. When the portfolio is shared (with the new entrant teacher, for example), insights can be gained, not only into children's experiences but also the knowledge they carry of what learning is valued. As we have already discussed, the knowledge arising from this sharing of information can assist the teacher to bridge children's transition into the classroom by helping them to identify more closely the continuities and discontinuities they will be experiencing. The following story illustrates this.

When my son started school three 3 ago I asked the teacher if she would like to see his early childhood portfolio. She was very enthusiastic, and after some casual conversations I asked her if she would participate in a tape-recorded interview, as many of her comments were directly relevant to work we were doing on the Early Childhood Exemplar project. We

taped a very informal interview where we tried to recap the things we had been discussing over the last few weeks. The teacher's comments highlight the usefulness of the early childhood assessment portfolios when children transition to school.¹

The following excerpts are also quoted from this interview:

Teacher: I really enjoyed reading about how he went to Mum's office and how he worked on the computer and it showed me the imagination that he has got, his ability to create stories because when children are starting to write they haven't got the fluency in their writing ... Some children don't have that fluency with their ideas that he certainly has, so that really showed up to me that side of him, because he started school and he was all quiet and I hadn't seen that side of him, so that was really good to know.

Interviewer: So I suppose it is the getting to know the children and their strengths?

Teacher: Yes, and even to know what his routines were like, because his routines have changed quite a bit coming to school rather than going to crèche so that has been quite an adjustment for him to make, so I understood that, so there's lots of little insights you get from it ... it is helping them to settle into school knowing what they are good at and you can give them opportunities for that. It really was useful, otherwise if you don't have that background then it takes you a while to get to know them, so I think that is one of the more important things, is that it is saving a lot of their time settling into school if you know a little bit more about their background and you can put things in place that suit them.

Through the sharing of his early childhood portfolio my son's teacher gained an insight into his routines, knowledge, skills, and previous learning experiences. However, it was just as important to feel that the knowledge I had of my son and his experiences in other learning communities was valued and respected. This respectful and reciprocal relationship allowed the teacher and me to support him in his transition to school in a co-ordinated and responsive way.

Further examples of how the family's voice can be valued and incorporated, so that a reciprocal relationship with the family can be developed and deepened, are given in Book 5: *Community of Kei Tua o te Pae Assessment for Learning: Early Childhood Exemplars* (Ministry of Education, 2005). Other examples can also be found throughout the other exemplar books.

Conclusion

This article has focused on teachers learning about the children and families in their centres and classroom through conversations and documentation. The examples given have illustrated how families' funds of knowledge, and knowledge about their children, can be accessed and shared. The resultant sharing of stories between the family and teachers, or between early childhood teachers and teachers of new entrants, not only enhances knowledge about the child—it can also contribute to the development of strong, reciprocal, and respectful relationships. Information gleaned from conversations, and reified through documentation, can help to bridge the discontinuities in a child's journey from one learning community to another when used by the teacher to assist in scaffolding the child's entry into a new community. It might be that skilled teachers do this effectively in their day-to-day practice, either consciously or intuitively. However, what this research has not yet explored in detail is the usefulness

for teachers' practice of foregrounding these types of conversations and documentation, to enhance children's transitions and their learning.

Further reading

- Carr, M., & Cowie, B. (2004). The consequences of sociocultural assessment in early childhood settings: Community, competence and continuity. In A. Anning, J. Cullen, & M. Fleer (Eds.), *Early childhood education: Society and culture* (pp. 95–106). London: Sage Publications.
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- Gonzalez, N., Moll, L., & Amanti, C. (2005). *Funds of knowledge: Theorizing practices in households, communities, and classrooms*. London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Ministry of Education. (1996). *Te whāriki: Early childhood curriculum. He whāriki mātauranga no nga mokopuna o Aotearoa*. Wellington: Learning Media.
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Rogoff, B. (2003). *The cultural nature of human development*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning and identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Note

- 1 This led to a paper entitled *I Didn't Want to be Seen as a Pushy Parent*, presented at a conference on transition in Sydney, in which I discussed the importance of using portfolios in a child's transition to school.

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